

Unwavering Vision

By LTC Thomas M. Cooke, USA

General George Scott Patton employed his superlative leadership skills to transform his command from a collection of untrained conscription soldiers into a victorious military force. His methods, albeit considered unorthodox by many contemporaries, embodied the concepts now considered key to effective leadership.

From his earliest days, Patton's actions revealed a deep understanding of the tenets now considered the bedrock of effective leadership. He understood that an organization was incapable of excellence without competent leadership. Although US Army Field Manual (FM) 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels*, was unavailable as a reference, his command style demonstrated the six leadership-model components in the figure.¹ He also understood the difference between direct and indirect leadership and successfully employed each at the appropriate time. He devoted his entire life to leading men into combat, and his efforts culminated with Third Army's success in Germany in 1945.

First and foremost, Patton had a vision from which he never wavered. Beginning with his motto, "*L'audace, l'audace, toujours l'audace*" [Audacity, audacity, always audacity!], he continually ensured his subordinates, peers and seniors knew where he was coming from and where he intended to go. As a World War (WW) I tank battalion commander, his written order stated, "You are the first American tanks—American tanks do not surrender!" He then added, "[The tanks'] presence will save the lives of hundreds of infantry and kill many Germans."² Patton demonstrated his understanding that a leader must be the standard bearer, developer, teacher and integrator of his unit into the larger pic-

ture.³ He also clearly defined his vision for combat: offensive operations; a sense of honor; focus on the enemy; and reliance on yourself, your training, equipment and leaders. More than any other commander, Patton insisted on addressing his units before combat, thereby providing them purpose, direction and the motivation necessary to elicit maximum effort.

Patton lived by an unusually strong code of ethics. His Aunt Nannie imbued in him a deep devotion to God and the Bible, while his father provided him an early appreciation for the humanities through such classical writers as Homer, William Shakespeare and Rudyard Kipling. The result was a creed that demanded adherence to a moral code for the purpose of noble deeds in the service of the human race. While a cadet at the US Military Academy, West Point, New York, he carried a small notebook in which he had written "Do your damedest [sic] always" and "Always do more than is required of you."⁴

Patton demanded that his peers and subordinates emulate his example, and he was highly critical of senior officers who did not live up to his expectations. As a cadet he had earned the reputation of a "quilloid," one who puts another cadet on report for a minor infraction, and throughout his career, he insisted on performance "by the book."⁵ Although repeatedly counseled for his intolerance, Patton never wavered from the belief that he was right and refused to apologize for his actions. What may be attributed to stubbornness was in reality a consistency that reflected the highest moral ideals to which he expected everyone to aspire. His consistency in everyday actions translated to certainty in combat situations that set him apart from his peers and today is

considered a major tenet of effective leadership.⁶

Few men have entered battle with the requisite skills Patton possessed. He began a lifelong study of military history as a small boy, listening to firsthand accounts from such notable Civil War leaders as Colonel John Mosby and his ancestors' military exploits. He began his formal training at the Virginia Military Institute (for one year) and graduated in 1909 from West Point, 46th out of a class of 103; his standing arguably would have been higher if not for his undiagnosed dyslexia. He attended the Fort Leavenworth *Command and General Staff School* in 1923-1924, finishing 25th out of 258 students and in 1931 graduated from the Army War College.

Learning

Throughout his career, Patton continued to hone his skills. He published his first professional military article in 1912 and, while vacationing in France in 1913, walked the ancient battlefields. While developing the US Army tank corps in France in 1917, he developed the principle of "the absolute necessity for a tank officer to personally see the ground." After the war and throughout the interwar years, he continued to study cavalry tactics and the use of armor in combat.

Through voracious reading, which included the writings of former enemy German Eleventh Army Chief of Staff Hans von Seeckt, Patton continually improved his military education. In preparation for his WW II campaigns, Patton read every book he could find on mobile warfare, including translated articles from German newspapers. His exhaustive lifetime preparation for battle provided him the required conceptual, competency and communication skills to react decisively during chaotic circumstances and emerge

victorious.⁷ His training allowed him to remove much of the Clauswitzian “fog of war” and contributed to his success.

Communicating

Patton understood the requirement to balance the demands of command, control, leadership and management to effectively lead his forces.⁸ He reveled in his “Old Blood and Guts” reputation, using it often to instill confidence in his troops during his frequent appearances at the front lines. Patton understood that successful command meant developing his vision and ensuring it was followed. When Patton addressed his troops before battle, there was no doubt he was in command. His subordinates received clear orders, understood what was expected and were willing to accept the consequences of their actions or inactions.

Patton believed control began at the lowest level. He insisted officers wear distinctive rank on their helmets to act as a rallying point for their men. Patton also developed a radio code system through which he could readily identify units and commanders, and he insisted all vehicles bear distinctive unit insignia to enhance unit cohesion—thereby overriding operations security concerns. His habit of prowling the front lines ensured continual control of the battle, and he would routinely appear unannounced at a command post, requesting an update.

Motivating

To Patton, leadership included mentorship, and during the Normandy Campaign, he refused Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D.

Eisenhower’s order to relieve a division commander. “No way,” he stated. “He’s one of my generals. I’ll straighten him out.”⁹ Patton also involved his commanders and staff in his major decisions. After briefing his commanders on his plan of action, he would invite them to “work it over,” then offer their recommendations.

Patton’s personal example exemplified his leadership. He never asked troops to do something he would not do himself and often placed himself in danger as a motivating tool. Patton also believed a leader should always appear invincible and tough, and he spent his entire career perfecting his “blood and guts” persona. In reality, he cared deeply for his men. He was renowned for recognizing leadership and bravery by decorating and/or promoting soldiers on the spot. He insisted his own accomplishments were the result of those who served under him. Although Patton was not immune to self-advancement, his actions reveal that his primary motivation was keeping soldiers alive in combat.

Team Building

As a manager, Patton preferred to envision the larger picture and leave the details to his staff. He had complete confidence in his team and relied on their judgment. During the Battle of the Bulge’s early days, Patton provided his staff three courses of action and directed them to develop contingencies for each. When the enemy situation became clear, he implemented the most appropriate plan. Ironically, his management style contrasted with the

more deliberate planning styles of both Eisenhower and General Omar Bradley. Patton’s management style was often interpreted as cavalier, fueling the contentious relationships between his senior leaders and him.

Patton knew a competent organization was vital to success. When he received combat command of II Corps in North Africa during WW II, he assembled a staff on which he could depend. Starting with his driver, Master Sergeant John Mims, who was with him throughout WW II, up to his chief of staff, Brigadier General Geoffrey Keyes, Patton surrounded himself with people he knew could get the job done. His core staff quickly coalesced into a loyal team that was to remain with him throughout the war.¹⁰

By Operation *Husky*, Patton’s staff had proved itself adaptive, cohesive and resilient.¹¹ When the British advance stalled along the Sicilian west coast road, Patton and his staff orchestrated an impromptu eastward “reconnaissance in force” that liberated Palermo and ultimately Messina. His headquarters completely rewrote the operations plan, which included such unscheduled maneuvers as frontal assaults and amphibious landings while receiving no additional logistics support. At one point, Patton’s chief of staff intentionally delayed delivering a cable from higher headquarters to ensure his boss’s plan would succeed. Although improper, it demonstrated the loyalty with which his staff operated.

Planning

Throughout his career, Patton’s leadership abilities were continually tested. Despite the “hollow Army” of the 1920s and 1930s, Patton relied on his personal code of ethics and sense of “duty, honor, country” to remain focused. He led the debate regarding the need for an increased armor force and concentrated on preparing himself and the Army for mobile warfare. This endeavor proved worthwhile during the 1941 *Louisiana Maneuvers* and invaluable during his later operations in North Africa.

Decision Making

While in North Africa, his personal supervision and strict standards turned the US II Corps into an effec-

The Core Dimensions of Leadership

The leader of character and competence . . .

acts to achieve excellence by providing purpose, direction and motivation.

Values "Be"		Attributes "Be"	Skills "Know"	Actions "Do"		
L Loyalty	Emotional Mental Physical	Tactical	Influencing	Operating	Improving	
D Duty			Communicating	Planning	Developing	
R Respect			Decision Making	Executing	Building	
S Selfless Service		Motivating	Assessing	Learning		
H Honor						
I Integrity						
P Personal Courage						

1. The emotional attributes are self-control, balance and stability.

2. The mental attributes are will, self-discipline, initiative, judgment, confidence, intelligence and cultural awareness.

3. The physical attributes are health, fitness, physical fitness, military bearing and professional bearing.

4. The required interpersonal, conceptual, technical skills and resulting tactical skill are different for the junior, senior and strategic leader.

A detailed account of these skills can be found in the skills chapters of FM 22-100, *Army Leadership* (1986 Draft), for the different levels of leadership.

tive fighting force, and his audacity was instrumental in the ultimate victory in Sicily. Later, his willingness to take risks proved key in directing the Third Army drive across France, and his ability to rally his troops was vital in turning the Third Army north in the dead of winter and relieving the besieged soldiers at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge.

Although Patton's methods were unorthodox, they were effective, and his results decisive. Even during his "exile days," following the slapping incidents in Sicily, Patton never wavered from his principles and accepted, albeit reluctantly, the consequences of his actions.¹² His leadership continued in absentia through the continued prowess of his former soldiers, and his reputation as an effective leader ultimately prevailed through his rehabilitation and subsequent command of the Third Army in France and Germany.

Leadership Style

Patton deftly employed direct leadership and knew when to practice a more indirect approach. Patton spent little time at his headquarters. He routinely visited the front lines and would personally lead an assault when he felt it necessary—despite being seriously wounded in WW I for the same tactic—direct traffic or help unload a landing craft. His almost rabid insistence on good order and discipline exemplified his direct leadership. Patton was convinced a soldier's survival depended on instinctive reactions, and he believed such reactions began with uncompromising discipline. Patton would personally admonish soldiers or levy fines for poor personal hygiene, failure to salute or minor uniform infractions. He wrote in his diary, "Discipline consists in obeying orders. If men do not obey in small things, they are incapable of being (led) in battle. I will have discipline—to do otherwise is to commit murder."¹³

In 1940, at Fort Benning, Georgia, while attempting to train the newly formed armor force, Patton realized his constant intervention was causing widespread confusion. He recognized that his presence could be a hindrance. He assembled his officers to conduct the first of what would today be considered an officer pro-

fessional development seminar. He gave his officers instructions, emphasizing that the offense was the best defense and used his vast knowledge of historic references to make his point. He then expected his officers to follow through, only coming to him for further instructions when necessary. His command philosophy soon spread throughout the unit.

Leadership has been described as more art than science and is therefore open to individual interpretation. Patton's leadership style emanated from his unwavering belief in his destiny. He was convinced God intended for him to lead a great army in a major conflict, and his religious and classical upbringing demanded he fulfill his destiny in the most humane way possible. Hindsight and revisionist history have produced a plethora of new insights regarding Patton's leadership style. He has been canonized in film, vilified in print and generally misunderstood. Whether one agrees with the way Patton performed his duty, there is no doubt he understood how to lead.

Having a leadership style that began with an unwavering dedication to his vision, Patton's single purpose was to defeat the enemy on the battlefield while taking care of the soldiers under his command. Although he often expressed his vision in a colorful or profane way, it was understood. Of all the soldiers serving in Europe, it was perhaps those in the Third Army who best knew what was expected of them.

Patton's ethics were above reproach. He never wavered from his belief that he was right despite being criticized for demanding standards to which few could adhere. Every counseling session, fine levied or commander relieved—he relieved only one commander in the field, 1st Armored Division Commander Major General Orlando Ward in March 1943—was designed to save lives in combat.

From childhood, Patton knew intuitively that he was destined for greatness. He honed his warfighting and leadership skills accordingly and learned when to lead and when to let others take charge. He surrounded himself with competent professionals on whose judgment he could always rely while he concentrated on

the larger issues.

Few individuals in history have had their leadership abilities tested to the extent Patton did. He intervened when he deemed it appropriate and stepped back when he thought necessary. He led America's transition to mobile warfare, turned an untrained conscript force into an effective armor corps and ultimately commanded the most successful army attack in Western history. His methods, lauded by most and condemned by many, embodied the concepts now considered key to effective leadership. *MR*

NOTES

1. Draft of US Army Field Manual (FM) 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, June 1987), 5.
2. Carlo D'Este, *A Genius for War: The Life of General George S. Patton, Jr.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 233.
3. FM 22-103, 12.
4. D'Este, 87.
5. *Ibid.*, 106.
6. FM 22-103, 24-25.
7. *Ibid.*, 27.
8. *Ibid.*, 41.
9. D'Este, 574-75.
10. In 1940, Brigadier General Patton offered his old friend Lieutenant Colonel Dwight Eisenhower a position as either chief of staff or regimental commander in the 2d Armored Division. Eisenhower considered the offer, but Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall intervened and assigned Eisenhower as Third Army chief of staff. This position showcased Eisenhower's managerial abilities that later resulted in his selection as Allied commander in North Africa. Although Eisenhower almost certainly would have preferred the regimental leadership position, Marshall's decision was ultimately fortuitous.
11. D'Este, 41.
12. In 1943, during the Sicily Campaign, Lieutenant General Patton slapped two soldiers suffering from what was termed "battle fatigue" in separate incidents while visiting field hospitals. Patton felt "battle fatigue" was cowardice and repeatedly stated after the incidents his motivation was to instill in each soldier a sense of shame and perhaps allow them to regain their nerve as well as honor. Eisenhower personally rebuked Patton for the incident and found his actions sufficient cause to deny him command of the Operation Overlord invasion force at Normandy the following year.
13. D'Este, 464.

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